



# Life of a Meditator (Part 1)

## An Interview with Bhikkhu Anālayo

*Q: Bhante, you spend much of your time in solitary retreat; perhaps you could tell us more about how you came to develop such a strong interest in meditation in the course of your life and also how that relates to your scholarly activities. It would be interesting to know more about your personal history. Maybe we can get started with the question: How did you come into contact with meditation?*

**A:** When I was about eight years old, I started practicing Judo, a Japanese martial art. At the beginning and the end of each training session, we would all sit in silence. That was basically my first encounter with meditation.

Martial arts continued to be of much interest to me for a considerable part of my life. From having trained in Judo, I proceeded to practice Aikido, another Japanese martial art. Both are what we could perhaps call grappling martial arts. Aikido has very beautiful circular movements, which fascinated me. It is also one of the very few, perhaps even the only, martial art that is entirely defensive. There are no aggressive motions. During that period my interest in meditation also started to grow, and I eventually practiced Zen in the Soto tradition.

In order to study also some striking martial arts, I later trained in Baguazhang, which comes from China and also incorporates circular movements. Finally, I ended up training in Chen-style Taijiquan, which moves the energy in circular ways, spiraling through the body—very powerful. By that time, I already had a strong regular meditation

practice. Chen-style Taijiquan became my favorite of these four and, although I am no longer a martial artist, I still do some of the basic exercises related to the energy work in this form of Taijiquan.

Besides introducing me to meditation, I think the many years of martial arts training have strengthened my self-discipline. It is due to that training that I can put myself to any task I decide I want to do and then I just get it done.

*Q: What religious upbringing did you have as a child?*

A: I had a very traditional Catholic upbringing. Every Sunday we went to church, and we said prayers before and after every meal. But when I was about twelve years old, I stopped participating in that and eventually left the Church. I think I need to explain a bit the background to that decision.

From the age of ten I had been very interested in the evolution of species. I would go on excursions organized by the Museum of Natural Sciences in my town to search for fossils. I was actually the only kid on these excursions; the others were all adults. I found this so fascinating: you break open a stone, and inside you find the remains of an animal or plant that lived many millions of years ago. Then you try to identify what type of animal or plant this was, in order to locate it within the overall evolution of species. For example, birds evolved from reptiles, which at some point started to jump from one tree to another, to avoid predators. In the course of many generations, they developed wings.

This fascination is something that, at least according to my mother, also informs my later academic research: the wish to understand how things line up over time and what conditions influenced them. Often, when I had made some academic discovery, my mother would say: “Look, my boy has found another fossil.” I think she was right; it was and still is the same type of fascination, of wanting to find out, and the wish to place things into a historical perspective.

But that type of perspective did not sit well with the Catholic authorities of my childhood, who were insisting on a literal reading of the Book of Genesis. Yet, I had myself broken up those stones and seen the fossils. I failed to see how the evidence I had witnessed myself could be reconciled with the idea that God created the world in a few days. So eventually I refused to go to church on Sundays or to participate in meal prayers, and as soon as I became old enough to be able to do so legally, I terminated my membership in the Church.

This reflects another characteristic trait of mine, in that when I feel I am supported by the evidence, I am willing to stand up against the rest of the world. If someone presents reasonable arguments or evidence, I am happy to change my opinions. But I won't be swayed by the majority. For me at that age to stand up against the whole family, against the parish priest, and against the teacher of religion at school was quite something. But I pushed through, as none of them could counter my arguments. Similarly, in my academic work, many of my major discoveries result from not going along with the majority.

*Q: Besides your interest in martial arts and in the evolution of species, was there anything else that made you develop a spiritual interest?*

A: Yes, something happened when I was about thirteen or fourteen years old. In our family, the person I felt particularly close to was my grandfather on my mother's side. My parents were so busy with work that they simply did not have much spare time, but he always had time for me, and he loved me very much. If he went travelling, he would bring me gifts, and we often spent time together talking. One time, when I was alone with him, he had a heart attack and died right in front of me.

For me this was a somewhat traumatic experience—the sudden loss of the person I loved so much. I couldn't cry, though. I was just totally quiet, withdrawn into myself

and watching what was happening, seeing how others reacted in a way that to me seemed to be reflecting their underlying fear of their own deaths. There was a large number of people at the funeral, since he had been highly respected by everyone. But they all quickly shifted from grief to drinking and eating, as if nothing had really happened. They right away tried to distract themselves with something else.

My grandfather's death really made me realize that I needed to face mortality—both my own and that of others. This has been a theme that has continued throughout my life. Every day I practice recollection of death. Moreover, if I want to do something, I will do it right away and wholeheartedly. Because who knows when I or others will die? So my grandfather had in a way given me the most important gift he could ever have given me. He left behind this central message for me: Face mortality!

*Q: That is indeed a powerful gift. Moving on from your childhood experiences, what motivated you to go to Asia?*

A: The decision to go to Asia was somewhat accidental, so I need to give a bit of background as to how this unfolded. My interest in the evolution of species had gradually shifted to the history of human civilizations, so when I went to university, I decided to study history. I also felt a need to do something that not only produces knowledge but also helps others, as I had become aware of my own privilege in being born in Europe, compared to the situation of many in what we now call the Global South. So I developed a special interest in Latin American history.

There was only a single professor for this branch of history at my university, and I ran into a problem with him regarding the topic to choose for my master's thesis. He wanted me to do some rather boring research, because he wanted to use the results for a book he was planning to write. My research was to be on the economic relationships between the banker family Rothschild and the state of

Jalisco in Mexico during a particular decade. This would have required spending many days in dusty archives collecting data. But I wanted to do something related to my ideals about human rights and democracy. My whole motivation was to make the world a better place, rather than just assembling some dry facts. Even though I made it clear that I definitely did not want to do that, he kept pushing, and I kept resisting.

Since there was no way of getting around him, I decided it is better I leave for some time to go travelling. I had been working in various jobs while at the university and had saved quite a bit of money, allowing me to go abroad for an extended time. Because of my ongoing interest in martial arts and meditation, I decided to head for India and China. The plan was just to take an extended holiday, not to stay and live there. I had lived abroad earlier, spending about two years in Italy working as a model and learning the language, a year working in the UK to improve my English, and a year in Mexico studying for a semester at a local university and improving my Spanish. Each time I had decided to go and live abroad, but this time the idea was just to travel a bit to get out of that impasse with my master's thesis.

*Q: As you just went for an extended holiday to Asia, in what way did this lead to you becoming a monk?*

A: I first went to India, studying Hatha yoga up in the Himalayas and also spending time at the burning ghats in Varanasi to reflect on mortality. When my visa was about to expire, I was advised to go to Thailand to get a new visa for India and that a good place to stay while in Thailand would be Wat Suan Mokkh. So, from Bangkok airport I went straight to Wat Suan Mokkh to sit a retreat on mindfulness of breathing.

The retreat at Wat Suan Mokkh was a major revelation for me. So far, my meditation had just been sitting silently, without awareness that there was more to meditating than just that. During my involvement with Zen, I had

not come to know much about the Buddhist background and my ideas about meditation were mainly focused on how to behave at the bodily level: how to get up, walk, and sit down again, and then how to stay seated without making any motion. But the detailed instructions on mindfulness of breathing given at Wat Suan Mokkh made me realize that, besides sitting still, there is also something to be done with the mind. Moreover, I discovered that there is a rich and sophisticated philosophy and culture in the background of such meditation practices. I was so impressed and amazed.

At the same time, however, I also realized how thoroughly distracted my mind was. They rang the gong to signal the beginning of the sitting meditation, and I would be aware of my first breath and then just be lost in thought until they rang the gong again to signal that the period was over. Alternating with the sitting, we were told to do walking meditation by choosing two palm trees and walking back and forth between them. I would regularly walk past my second palm tree, because by the time I reached it I had completely forgotten what I was doing.

At the end of the retreat, I came to the conclusion that, although meditation is much more profound than I had thought previously, I was not well-suited for it. My mind was too distracted. So, I thought I should better forget about meditation and just practice martial arts.

On the last day of the retreat Ajahn Buddhādāsa gave a Dhamma talk, and something he said at that time, which unfortunately I no longer remember exactly, gave me the confidence that I could do it, however distracted I may be. He turned my life around at that point, as I would otherwise not have continued dedicating myself to meditation.

There was a foreign monk at Wat Suan Mokkh who invited me to come with him to another monastery close to the seaside. We arrived there shortly before the annual rainy season retreat, and it is a custom in Thailand that young men, at least once in their life, take temporary ordination during the three months of the rainy season retreat

and after that return to lay life. Preparations for that were underway, and the abbot invited me to join in. So I got ordained with only a rather hazy idea of what it means to be a Buddhist monk, having just arrived in Thailand a few weeks earlier, and also with very little knowledge of Theravāda Buddhism—basically only what I remembered from the Dhamma talks during the retreat. That is how I became a monk.

Like the others in the group of temporary ordinands, I received basic monastic training at the main monastery, but otherwise I spent the rainy season in a cave situated within the wider area of the monastery, on top of a small mountain that was surrounded by the ocean on three sides. In the early morning I climbed down to the bottom of the mountain to meet a senior monk who had taken the role of being my monastic tutor. We would go together along the beach to a nearby village to beg alms, return, and eat together at his hut, and then I would usually just go back to the cave for the rest of the day. It was all very romantic, had it not been for my distracted mind.

At the end of the rainy season, I asked if I could stay in robes for longer, and the abbot readily agreed. So I spent about two years in robes. During that time, I did a one-month retreat in the Mahāsi method, which I found very interesting, although it somehow did not work so well for my type of personality, as I felt a bit disconnected from my body. After that, I did a 10-day retreat in the Goenka method, which I believe was the first time, or at most the second time, such a course was conducted in Thailand; at that time they did not yet have their own center. That practice worked very well for me. The body scanning technique fitted in smoothly with my martial arts training and familiarity with the body and its energies, and it also helped me to counter my tendency to distraction by rooting attention in the body. This became my main practice for a long time to come.

Eventually, however, the time had come to return to Germany, as there were a number of things that needed to

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be settled. I still had an apartment in my name, although someone else was staying in it during my absence, I was still enrolled at the university, etc. After all, the original idea had been only to go away for a longer holiday. So I disrobed and returned to Germany to settle things, with the idea of returning to Asia and taking ordination again afterwards.

(to be continued)